

Shark Girls

Jaimee Wriston Colbert
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“Random things happen, and these are the things that change everything else.” *Shark Girls*’ second sentence succinctly states one of its themes—the long-term consequences of accidents that occur in one horrible moment. The book focuses on two protagonists: Scat, who grows up in Hawaii and becomes a photographer of disasters, and Gracie, who flees from her New York home to an odd Maine boarding house nicknamed “America’s Haunted Housewives.”

Though they do not meet until novel’s end, Scat and Gracie’s paths and desires often mesh. Both experience, as small girls, calamities that forever alter the directions of their lives. Scat’s sister, rumored to be a miraculous healer and who may have re-grown a leg severed by a shark, was the prior tenant of Gracie’s room before she mysteriously vanished. The narration oscillates across the country and through time, detailing the heroines’ often flawed attempts to make sense of their circumstances, their families, and their acquaintances. Each quests for normalcy, intimacy, and healing—yearnings which are shared by the damaged people around them. This creates a poignant, layered narrative, a sort of literary fugue.

The author of one previous novel—*Climbing the God Tree* (Willa Cather Fiction Prize)—and two short story collections—*Dream Lives of Butterflies* (2008 Independent Publisher Award) and *Sex, Salvation, and the Automobile* (Zephyr Publishing Prize)—Colbert develops a strong sense of person and place. If action and dialogue sometimes seem somewhat manipulated, this is countered by Colbert’s sharp eye for detail and empathy for the aching soul: “I was a filet mignon in a meatloaf life,” says Scat’s alcoholic mother, poignantly summing up her frustration as a 1950s’ housewife.

Book sections often begin with Hawaiian shark lore—myths of shark gods or men who become sharks or women who give birth to sharks. Though interesting, the point of their inclusion is not entirely clear. Colbert, however, is not necessarily concerned with telling a neatly packaged story. Life’s journey can be chronicled; meaning often remains elusive. That doesn’t keep people from seeking it, however.

“Isn’t that what we all want? To be loved no matter what face we offer the world,” says one character.

Of course. This touching book is about the search for those great givers of meaning, understanding and love—the most powerful antidotes to the accidental circumstances that direct so much of human existence—not necessarily the finding of them. (November) *Rob Baker*